



COVER SHEET

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POONA FUTURES

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Abstract:

Poona Futures is the most recent in a decade of advanced landscape design studios that explore the intersection of urban design, local economic development and, more recently, the concept of learning communities through direct community engagement. The students and their “client” community explore alternative futures that inform and assist responses to change management. It provides a rich and challenging learning experience for students. The approach to studio and learning design that has evolved in these projects, the influences of community body types, and the impact key people involved in the engagement process have on project outcomes are discussed.

Key words:

Heritage, environment, urban growth, sustainable, management, studio design

Introduction:

The subtropical village of Poona is located in south east Queensland, Australia, on the idyllic coast of Great Sandy Strait that separates the mainland from World Heritage listed Fraser Island. Great Sandy Strait is one of Australia’s 68 listed Ramsar sites and is a wetland system of international significance (*DEH 2005*). Poona Point lies within the traditional lands of the Badjala people and contains several remnant middens (piles of discarded mollusc shells accumulated over millennia of indigenous occupation). The village has a current population of around 200 people of which about half are weekenders. The main attraction for locals and visitors is fishing and engagement with the terrestrial and marine wildlife of the region. There is no industry, no reticulated water, no municipal sewerage treatment and no expectation of any change in any of these particular attributes in the future. The village sits on sandy soils over an extensive and high watertable directly connected to highly valued Melaleuca wetlands which in turn drain into the Strait. Extensive residential subdivisions approved in the early 90s are now partially constructed and will potentially expand Poona’s population to around 1600. When completed, the new subdivisions will spread the physical urban fabric of the village to the edge of the Melaleuca wetlands. The very environment which is the reason for Poona’s existence is under threat as is the subtropical coastal lifestyle which is attracting people to move there as new land becomes available (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1: – Early morning at the boat ramp
(Photos: Clarke *et al*, 2005)



Figure 2: The edge of the Melaleucas

In 2005, final year landscape architecture and urban design students engaged with the Poona community to explore possible futures that seek to manage the impacts of urban growth on the environmental and lifestyle values of the place. The issues addressed in the project included:

- application of water sensitive urban design principles to all remaining subdivision development (Figure 3);
- retrofitting linear wetlands between existing stormwater discharges and the Melaleuca wetlands to remove pollutants;
- integrating a framework for a cohesive village centre to grow with population (Figure 4); and
- developing management strategies to protect or rehabilitate the public domain and environmental values of the eroding foreshore reserve.

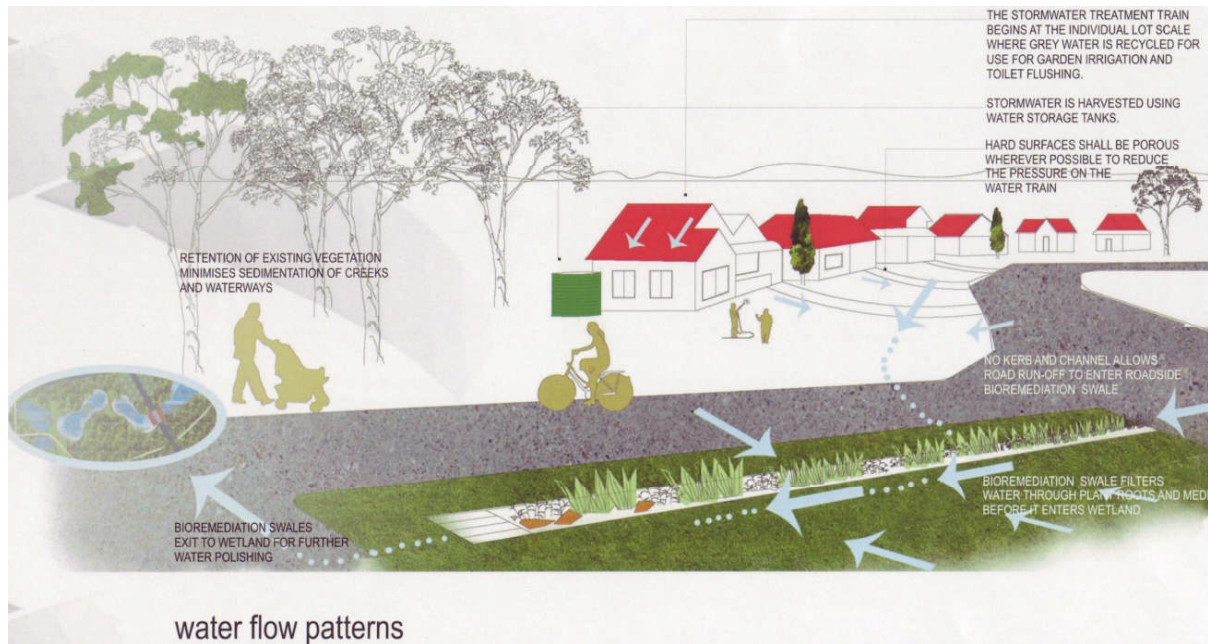


Figure 3: Water sensitive urban design proposal for yet to be built subdivisions with water cleansing lakes in parkland (Doblo 2005).

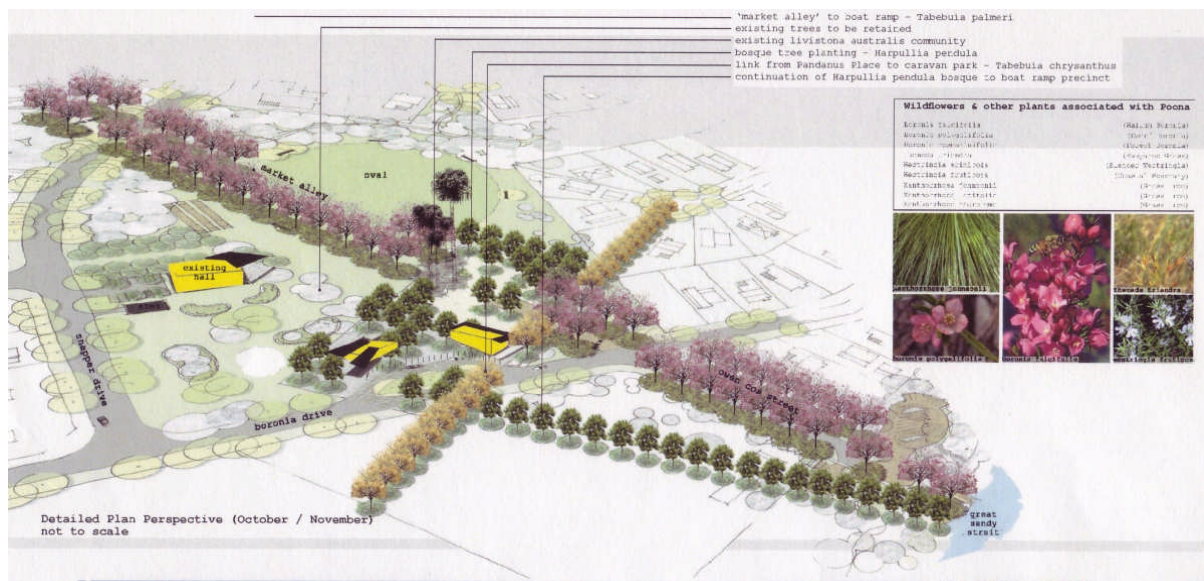


Figure 4: Proposal for future towncentre to meet needs of the expanded community (Nicolosi 2005)

The project resulted in a commitment by the developer to seek environmentally sensitive design and construction methods for the remainder of the development. It also resulted in local government and community resolve to cooperatively embed sustainable management practices into management of Poona Point's social and environmental values. This project is a notable example of a regular series of design studios structured on direct community engagement in diverse real world issues dating back into the mid 1990s. Its successful outcomes have resulted from an outstanding commitment by the students involved and an enthusiastic community "client". My accumulated experience of negotiating and structuring the projects and the processes by which the students are encouraged to learn through direct engagement with communities is a contributing factor. The primary focus of this paper is on the studio pedagogy, forms of student participation in the project and the influence the types of engagement made with the respective community groups has had on outcomes. The paper will conclude with a summary of key aspects of engagement in the *Poona Futures* project that contributed to its success.

The pedagogical strategy

As is normal with design studios, the core approach is that of problem-based learning which places a priority on student centred learning, both as collaborators in teams and as individuals in a reflective practice environment. Students are required to keep a Reflective Journal throughout the studio to encourage their development as reflective practitioners (Schon 1987). Overall the design of the problem-based learning environment follows closely on what Woods *et al* (2000) call the McMaster Problem Solving Strategy – *engage, define the stated problem, explore, plan, do it and look back*. A global objective is to develop the following graduate capabilities in our students:

- advanced understanding of social, economic and environmental issues in contemporary urban settings and integrating site planning skills in urban contexts;
- advanced applications of critical, creative and analytical thinking, problem identification and solving in design;
- professional communication skills;
- advanced research strategies, data/information retrieval and evaluation strategies;
- advanced group collaboration and independent input skills to develop effective change outcomes; and
- active contribution to issues of social, economic, environmental and ethical responsibility.

The organisational concept for these studios, predicated on effective community engagement, is that of *creative associations* (Armstrong 1999) which encourages exploration of new relationships between the university and communities. This exploration requires recognition of:

- the differing forms of knowledge (theoretical, formal, informal, practical, local and tacit); and
- the ways in which communities can use their cultural capital and these different forms of knowledge to accommodate change.

There is increasing recognition of the role of universities to engage in community networks and their potential to enhance new knowledge creation through the integration of *discovery, integration, application and teaching* (Boyer 1990) in real world contexts. It recognises the importance of innovation and learning in contributing to the economic, social and cultural foundation of local communities. Communities and universities working collaboratively can produce wide-ranging and unexpected benefits. Universities have a key role in supporting local creativity and enterprises and help embed learning in the wider community (*Commonwealth of Australia, 2003*). The studio provides a space within which students and community participants are able to explore ideas in a creative, open and inquiring manner without committing the participants to implementing the outcomes.

Pedagogy and project selection criteria

Objectives, designed to synthesise prior learning at a professional level of study, provide the primary criteria for selection of all studio projects. These objectives require:

- detailed understanding of the potential and challenges for achieving change in the existing urban form over time through the creative cooperation of the public and private sectors;
- valid comparisons among planning and design solutions for a range of approaches to achieving a given goal;
- advanced application of investigative, analytical and site planning skills;
- advanced design skills and communication techniques at a strategic scale; and
- advanced skills in the resolution of landscape design and detailing closely related to site context.

These learning objectives are supported by design objectives to:

- recognise the role and dynamics of the study site and its community in its historical and contemporary context
- recognise the local and contextual cultural landscape and community values,
- respect all relevant historical links and references, and
- achieve a viable, functional and aesthetically valid landscape form and character for the precinct which integrates it into its larger context.

Studio structure

The thirteen week studios are typically structured into three phases:

- initial group work (3 to 4 students per group) in the first four weeks to establish the community engagement, undertake site appraisal and develop a theoretical framework to intellectually underpin an expanded project brief and subsequent design exploration;
- continued group work for the next three weeks to develop a spatial strategic vision and policy/design guidelines for the whole project; and
- individual work in the final weeks where negotiated aspects of the group strategic framework are developed into detailed design proposals capable of implementation.

A key learning component of the initial phase is the development of the theoretical framework and project brief. The process is facilitated by a series of structured weekly exercises, supported by selected and general bibliographies, designed to collectively engage students in the diversity of theory that might be drawn upon to underpin design.

For example, the *Poona Futures* project involved three such exercises. The first exercise asked the question, “*What is this town? Is it ... ?*” and allocated one of three thematic lenses to each group through which to explore the question. The lenses were:

- *an economic enterprise based on its setting;*
- *a symbiotic relationship between its people and its setting; and*
- *a natural environment as part of its setting.*

The objective of this exercise, which I have used in two previous studios, is to expose the students to a more creative environment in which to undertake the site appraisal, to get them away from the dour connotations of site analysis and to encourage them to think more laterally about the site’s potentials and challenges. Feedback from students over its three iterations indicates the strategy is very effective in achieving this objective.

The second exercise asked the students to consider the potential of the *Hannover Principles* (McDonough 1992) to provide a set of protocols applicable to setting an agenda for Poona. An important outcome from this was the clear recognition by most students that these protocols, although sound, were dated and that concepts of sustainable development had moved on. The third exercise required the synthesis of the collective outputs from

the first two into a conceptual project brief (program) incorporating the core theoretical framework to be adopted by each group. Each of the exercises was presented in class with a required emphasis on graphic communication of ideas and was peer evaluated to provide formative feedback. The total product became an open access on-line class resource for the remainder of the semester.

Influence of the types of engagement with communities on outcomes

Table 1 summarises a selected range of studio projects undertaken over the past decade in terms of focus, the types of community bodies involved, the nature of the community contacts and outcomes achieved.

Project focus

All of the projects reported have a core emphasis on the complex theories of urban design (as a means of dealing with change management and community values and expectations). The studios are based on the proposition that the intersection of urban design which seeks to focus on place and is an integral part of place making and what might be broadly termed learning communities as a component of local economic development and the idea of sustainable communities affords a rich “space” or place to explore contemporary responses to global change. We do this as both trends (urban design/place making and community) seem to be converging. We propose this theoretical space offers opportunities for communities to develop innovative design solutions for sustainable livelihoods in the context of local distinctiveness and local capacity; a space to speculate on place making. All projects have a strong requirement for students to embed indigenous perspectives wherever possible and to respect the cultural values of the place in suggesting ways of dealing with change.

Types of community bodies involved and the nature of the community contacts

Our studio projects typically engage with one of three types of community bodies:

- local government through either an elected representative or an employed Council Officer or both (Rosewood, Mackay South, Logan Central, Pottsville, Victoria Point, Clermont, Allora); or
- an established community group supported by local government, usually through the elected representative (Narangba, Montville, Poona*); or
- an established community group in conflict with local government (Maleny, Poona) (see Table 1).

Poona sat across two categories. The community was in conflict with their local Council for approving the development they were concerned about but they were strongly supported through their elected Councillor to seek ways to dealing with the impacts of it.

Outcomes achieved

Experience has shown that outcomes from the community engagement has been most effective where the key contacts have been community leaders (Narangba, Maleny, Poona) and to a lesser extent where the primary contact has been the elected representative (Allora). The least effective has been projects negotiated through local government employees (Mackay South, Victoria Point, Clermont). The exceptions here have been:

- Rosewood which was run during local government elections and both the elected incumbent and the aspirant saw it as a good vehicle to support their personal platforms; and
- Logan Central where the enthusiasm of the public officer concerned actively supported the conduct of the studio and ensured the work was carried on after the studio concluded. The Logan Central project won international peer reviewed awards for both studio staff and students.

The jury is still out in terms of the longer term impact of the *Poona Futures* project as it is still too recent. However, the indications are that this may well be one of the most successful studios we have run in this genre in terms of both student and community learning. A lot of the success has to do with the enthusiasm and passion with which both students and community engaged formally and informally throughout the semester despite the three hour drive each way between the campus and Poona. The passion was undoubtedly engendered by the nature of the place itself. The enthusiasm, which was ultimately embraced by the developer as well, stemmed from a wide community acceptance of the contribution the students could make to empowering them to influence their future lifestyle. Just as importantly, acceptance by the students that local knowledge, including that of the developer, had a lot to contribute to their design explorations and growth as future professionals contributed its own enthusiasm. Together, they creatively demonstrate why we engage in community engagement as a teaching vehicle (*Ramaley 2001*).

Table1 : Summary of selected projects 1995 – 2005

Year	Project	Community body (project sponsor)	Key community contact	Summary of tangible outcomes
1995	Rosewood townscape study	Ipswich City Council	Director, Parks and Recreation	Consultant appointed to implement some park elements
	Mackay South townscape study	Mackay City Council	Director, Planning Department	None known
1996	Narangba townscape study	Narangba Beautification Committee + Caboolture Shire Council	Chair of committee + local Councillor	Consultant appointed by local council to implement significant elements. Narangba Beautification Committee disbanded afterwards.
1997	Logan Central study	Logan City Council	Main Street Improvement Coordinator	Became basis for an extended program of urban re-vitalisation projects
	Pottsville Village project	Tweed Shire Council	Engineer Manager, Urban Design	Influenced approach to managing village centre growth
1998	Victoria Point land-use study	Redlands Shire Council	Director, Planning Department	None known
1999	Montville Family Park	Maroochydore Shire Council	Chair, Community Steering Committee	None known
2000	Clermont townscape study	Belyando Shire Council	Director, Planning Department	None known
2003	Allora townscape study	Warwick Shire Council	Local Councillor	2 projects identified for inclusion in future budgets.
2004	Maleny Bio-regional Gardens	“Green Hills” Action Group	Local community leaders	Major reforms to political decision making and community consultation processes
2005	Poona Futures	Poona Ratepayers Association	Local community leader	Development processes to be revised. Closer management ties between council and community.

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